



State of South Carolina
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Aging Community and Native Leaders Make an Important Connection at Summer School of Gerontology

Chronic Health Problems are killing South Carolina's Native American elders:

The overall health of Native American elders in South Carolina is at or near crisis level, according to Barbara MorningStar Paul, Native Affairs Coordinator for the State Commission for Minority Affairs (CMA). Worse, the issue is largely hidden from view.

The vast majority of the problems faced by the state's aging Indian population can be expressed by a single statistic, according to Paul. The average age of Native American adults in South Carolina is going down, and chronic illnesses such as diabetes, cancer and heart disease, exacerbated by poverty and poor living conditions are a major reason why. That's in marked contrast to South Carolina's population at large, which is seeing an increase in average lifespan driven by the baby boom generation and a huge influx of retirees from other parts of the country. The US Administration on Aging estimates that nationwide, 15% of the total population was over 65 in 2005. Although Mature Adults Count's latest data shows that South Carolinians 65 and older make up 12.4% of our state, Paul said only 7.2% of Native Americans in our state reach 65.

"Our elders are precious to us, and we know we are losing them young," says Paul. "We are losing many of them before age 65."

One stumbling block in the road to addressing the problem is getting accurate numbers and assessments about the health of the Native American population statewide. While Paul's extensive contacts and travels around the state give her a bird's eye view, hard statistical data that researchers and policy makers can use to attack the problem are harder to come by.

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Although there are 25 different tribal groups and organizations active in the state, including five state-recognized tribes, three state-recognized groups and one special interest organization; only one, The Catawba Indian Nation in York County, is a federally-recognized tribal entity with access to federal funds and programs that address Native American health issues. And since the primary source for data on Native American health is through the federal Indian Health Service (IHS), only the 1,000-1,500 members of the Catawba tribe are represented in most federal studies and research into the issues.

But there's no real reason to think that the health issues of the state's other estimated 25,000 Native American Indians is very different from that of the Catawba members, says Paul. Nonetheless, part of the CMA's strategy for addressing the health disparities that are killing tribal elders includes working to gather better data about the health of this population. The agency recently hired a full time researcher. That should help with planning for a more accurate assessment of the need for better services in the more isolated Native American communities around the state, said Paul. "Our dream is to do a more accurate assessment."

World's Apart - Fear and Lack of Understanding Cause Barriers to Accessing Services:

Aside from better research into the causes of the health crisis that is killing Native elders, a large part of the solution to this problem lies simply in helping increase their access to such established services as those funded under the Older Americans Act that are available for all older South Carolinians. Those services are coordinated by the Lt. Governor's Office on Aging and have a proven track record for improving the health outcomes of the state's frail elderly. Older Americans Act services such as congregate and home delivered meals, homecare and respite are delivered at the community level by county aging organizations, senior centers and other non-profit groups. The problem, says Paul, is getting those service providers and the Indian groups together.

The troubled history of relations between South Carolina's first citizens and the descendants of the European settlers has, unfortunately, left many in the current generation of Native American elders in the shadows, unable – or in some cases unwilling – to access the type of government-sponsored supports that white and African American citizens use routinely. Only one Senior Center geared specifically towards Native American elders exists in the state – on the Catawba Reservation in Rock Hill.

Fear is a large part of it, says Paul because generations of racism and oppression - both overt and under the radar screen – have left many elders reluctant to even acknowledge their heritage outside of their close-knit family and tribal groups. There's a reluctance to be involved with anything that is connected with the government that can be hard for non-Indians to understand, according to Paul. "We know we have seniors out there that are hungry," she says, "but it's a big barrier to them seeking out services."

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There's also a lack of awareness on the part of service providers. Many people just assume that all Native Americans live on reservations and are "taken care of" by the federal government, not realizing that the actual picture of how and where Native Americans live is much more complicated. Others are simply unaware the native groups exist, even when they are right under their noses.

Paul tells the story of stopping in a local government office building to ask for directions to the headquarters of the state-recognized Santee Indian Tribe. "No one in the office had ever even heard of them," says Paul. When she got back in her car and finally made it to the Santee's office, Paul realized it was less than a mile away from the place she had stopped at to ask for directions.

"You would be amazed at the number of well-educated people I have talked to about this that say 'you mean we still have Indians in South Carolina?'" says Paul.

Building Bridges:

The process of raising awareness about the health of Native American elders on both sides of this cultural divide is critical, according to Lt. Governor André Bauer, head of State Office on Aging.

"It's a two-way street that involves making sure elders are aware of the services that are available to them, while we simultaneously work to make sure that the people working to provide senior services at all levels are aware of this population and actively engaged in the challenge of improving their health. Our office is committed to making that happen," says Lt. Governor Bauer.

Working with Paul and leaders of the Waccamaw Indian People, a state-recognized tribe based in Horry County, the Lt. Governor's Office on Aging is using its annual Summer School of Gerontology to raise awareness of this issue in the state's senior community. Every summer for the past 30 years, professionals, advocates, policymakers and others involved in aging issues in South Carolina have come together at the Summer School to earn continuing education credits for their professional careers and to share their experiences and ideas.

This year, a demonstration of Native American dances and culture will be a featured part of Summer School. Also, Barbara Morningstar Paul's class on The Invisible Population - Native Americans in South Carolina, which will be held from 1:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. on Wednesday, August 23, will provide an in-depth discussion of Native American issues.

"We see this as an important first step in changing attitudes and bringing awareness of this population to the forefront," says Lt. Governor Bauer. "We are working hard to build a future South Carolina that is prepared to meet the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities that are going to be presented to us by a rapidly aging population, and we're committed to making sure that the descendants of our first citizens are a part of that future."